

AFFAIRS OF TODAY IN THE CANARIES

A Province of Spain, Managed for Profit—Life Among the People—The Guanches, or Aboriginal People.

Special Correspondence.

Santa Cruz, Tenerife, Dec. 4.—How ever fine the scenery or quaint the architecture of unfamiliar countries, it is after all, the people, with their strange costumes and customs, that most interest the traveler. The Canary archipelago has long been a province of Spain—not a colony, as was Cuba and other western possessions; and so well did the Norman baron, Jean de Bethencourt do his work, when he conquered the seven islands in the name of Juan II, of Castile—exactly five hundred years ago next June—that the population of today is as thoroughly Spanish in thought and feeling as natives of the step-mother country. There are about three hundred and fifty thousand people, all told, in the islands, and as monied a collection as can be found anywhere in equal space. Being descended from Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Moors and negroes mixed with all the races of modern Europe, they are darker in color than even the people of southern Spain, where Moorish blood predominates. Most of them are simple, amiable folk, devoted to such agriculture as the soil and climate admits. Industrious as might be expected under a tropical sun, with no lofty ambitions and easily ruled by their self-appointed task masters.

Far greater interest centers around the Guanches, or aboriginal inhabitants of the Canaries, about whose origin ethnologists and historians are yet quarrelling, though the race has been extinct two or three centuries. Some maintain that the Guanches were an offshoot from one of the Libyan tribes of nearby Africa, because the few words that have been preserved of their language resemble the Berber dialects of today. Others find equal proof of their Greek or Roman origin in the fact that they had fair skins, blue eyes and long, straight hair, often red or sandy—which are certainly not African characteristics. Perhaps they belonged to the lost continent, Atlantis, of which, if it ever existed, these islands were a part—descendants of the Noah of that ancient catastrophe which

drowned a world. At any rate, all authorities agree that the original inhabitants of the "Happy Islands," the "Garden of Hesperides," the "Elysian fields," as the group has been known to various nations, were a tall and handsome race, brave and strong, and such good fighters that their wooden spears and arrows several times repelled Spanish and Portuguese expeditions sent to subjugate them. But those primitive weapons could not long withstand the power of firearms. Most of the Guanches were killed in opposing invaders; many were sold by their conquerors as slaves, and most of the remainder perished in the terrible pestilence of 1494—caused, it is said, by the great number of dead bodies left unburied by the Spaniards after the battle of Laguna.

History tells us that the ancient people had no boats, and therefore could hold no communication with the main land, nor with the several islands; so that each island was a little kingdom by itself, with a different dialect and its own laws and customs. Their food was gopho, or roasted corn mixed with goat's milk; and they also ate cheese, fish, fruit and fresh meat. Their clothes were of skins, sewed together with fish-bone needles; and a few wore shirts made of plaited rushes—those of the married women being longer than those of the men. The historian quaintly adds: "The maidens of the 'Fortunate Islands' went about quite naked, but without consciousness of shame, such was their innocence. They sang sweetly and danced almost as well as Frenchmen." In religion the Guanches were theists, worshipping the God of earth and heaven, air and water; they believed in immortality, and in rewards and punishments after death. A few had stone houses, thatched with palm, but the majority were troglodytes, or dwellers in caves. By the way, the custom of turning the soft, volcanic rock into habitations has never been entirely abandoned by the islanders. Especially in Gran Canaria you may see many cave-dwellings yet in use, though the modern ones have face-walls and many improvements. Among the greatest "sights" of the islands are the stone houses and honey-combed rocks of the aborigines, and their catacombs

in the cliffs. The Guanches embalmed their dead and then hid them in the most inaccessible caverns they could find. High up in a vertical cliff, just back of this point of Santa Cruz, are two immense caverns, said to be crowded with mummies. There are many others, notably those at Icod de los Vinos. In the rocky cliffs that environ Gran Canaria, and—greatest of all and last discovered—the catacombs in the precipices of Guimar. The last named caverns have as yet been little explored, for they can be reached only by one who is courageous enough to let himself be lowered over the edge of the cliffs, where he hangs suspended above tremendous surf pounding more than a thousand feet below—until his feet finally touch a narrow shelf of rock at the mouth of a cavern which runs sharply downward into eternal darkness. Nobody knows to what depth. Neither your correspondent nor any of her party are brave enough to venture on such a gruesome expedition; but we have been so fortunate as to meet a couple of zealous Scotch antiquarians, who have spent several years in the Canaries and explored a number of the catacombs. They say that the greatest danger is in the superstitions of the people. It is almost impossible to induce any Canary islander to assist you in visiting the ancient tombs, believing that the ghosts of those who were hidden with such care will wreak dire vengeance on intruders. After you have succeeded in hiring a company of peasants to lower you over the cliff and screwed their courage up to the sticking point with gold and wine, they are likely to desert at the slightest noise—even to let go the rope and run away, leaving you to drop into the raging surf, or to perish in the darkness of the catacombs.

The mummies are found standing erect around the wall of rock, each with a stout staff in his hand, and at his feet a clay pot, which is supposed to have contained gopho for the soul's food on its long journey. No antiseptic preparation seems to have been used in the mummifying process, but the bowels of the corpse were removed and the cavity filled with seeds. No trace of bandages nor clothes of any kind has been found, but each mummy is sewed up in tanned goat-skins, the outer covering decorated with raw-hide thongs, like fringe, knotted in a peculiar fashion, and hung with little discs of baked earth. Wooden spears are also found in the catacombs, elaborately carved and tipped with obsidian; arrow-heads; hand mills for grinding gopho; leather pitchers for holding water, wine and milk; bowls of baked clay, unglazed; small bones, supposed to represent money; and clay pipes, similar to those found in some of the old Kistvaens of Ireland. So it may be inferred that the Guanches were smokers—though, like the an-



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cient Irish, they may not have smoked tobacco. The comparative discovery of a variety of sculptured stones in the Canaries, covered with symbols precisely like those found on similar stones near the shores of Lake Superior, is regarded as priceless nuggets of proof in favor of Atlantis by those who advocate the theory of a lost continent. In the museum of Los Palmas, on Gran Canaria island, may be found a good many relics of the aborigines; but nothing which seems to speak of them so forcibly as the colossal group of statuary in the plaza of Santa Cruz. It represents the popular tradition of the apparition of the Virgin of Candelaria to the four kings of the Guanches, which is believed to have taken place in the year 1532. The statue is of the finest Carrara marble and well executed—the beautiful female figure upon a pedestal, supported by the four Indian monarchs, each of whom carries a huge thigh-bone for a war club. Sad to say, the illustrious company of five enjoy but one nose among them, and that is the topmost, probably because the virgin's countenance happens to be just beyond the reach of vandals' "middles."

The Canary Islands of today is not a handsome creature, whether male or female, young or old. The common type, universal in all the islands, consists of a tall, bony frame, an elongated head, lusciously faced mouth and nose and brown face very large and heavy, in which the small blue eyes look as lonesome as two worldeberies on a big wooden platter. The dress of each island shows some peculiarity different from all the others—that is, among the

peasantry. Of course the true Canary costumes are seen only on the peasants, the higher classes being entirely Spanish or European, who wear imported clothes—all but hats and shoes, which are made in the Canaries. Strange to say, men, women and children are accustomed to walk barefooted over the plains that are filled with spiny cacti, and the burning rocks of lava which in a few hours will wear out the stoutest shoes. They all have shoes, but it is the fashion to wear them only in the easy streets of the towns. If you meet them anywhere else, the men are invariably carrying their shoes at the end of a stick, and the women economizing their by wearing them on their heads. The women of Tenerife wear a skirt and apron of cotton, and a well-fitted bodice with enormous sleeves and a sort of fichu, which ends in points both behind and in front. When abroad the head is covered with a large square of white cotton cloth, or a white knitted shawl, the corners of which dangle gracefully down the back. On top of the shawl is placed a small straw hat, low crowned and saucer shaped; and on top of the hat may be a bundle, or jar of water, a few vegetables, or a load of faggots, besides the precious shoes. The use of the shawl, or a squinch of cloth, is to protect the wearer's neck from the pest of stinging flies, and also to shade the spine from the sun, which is believed to bring on ague or rheumatism.



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Not least important in the outfit of every peasant in the Canaries, male or female, is the dirty string of wool or leather, worn around the neck, and suspended from it an amulet blessed by the priest—for a consideration!—and which preserves the wearer from the evil eye and other harmful influences. On Lanzarote island the men as a rule are much smaller than the women, and decidedly less masculine in appearance. The sirens wear their hair short, have luxuriant moustaches on their upper lips, and are passionately devoted to smoking cigars. The wives make all their husbands' clothes with their own brawny hands and trick their little darlings out in gorgeous array. Thus, when in full dress a Lanzarote man wears knee-trousers, (trousers with bright ribbons and long streamers; sleeveless jacket of red, green, or yellow cloth, a silken blue cap, embroidered with all the colors of the rainbow and displaying a knot of ribbons at one side. Naturally these treasured men do not work—such duties being left to their dotting wives.

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